

Chapter One

Mediating democratic engagement: The impact of new media on Nigerians' involvement in political and civil life

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Abstract

The new media has become a primary news stories hub in Nigeria in recent times. Stories about civic demonstrations, social crusades, public office holders, elections, political corruption, and police brutality are items that consistently make the news on new media platforms; hence, media audiences are greatly influenced with respect to political and civic matters. This study investigated the impact of new media in mediating democratic engagement among Nigerians. The study is anchored on the public sphere and social capital theories, and combined the qualitative desk and case referencing research approach. The study revealed that Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter are highly engaged platforms for democratic purposes in Nigeria as Nigerians now participate heavily in social demonstrations, contribute to political discussions, seek justice, and engage political leaders on democratic and social matters in the online space. The study also discovered that new media has improved the involvement of Nigerians in the electioneering process although much of the involvement in this area is purely online rather than at the polls where leaders are elected. The study suggests that Nigerians, especially youths, should add action to their virtual voices and move beyond holding demonstrations like we have seen in recent times, to actively getting involved in the process of electing leaders into political offices across the nation.

Keywords: Cyber journalism, Digital democracy, Government, Netizens, Nigeria, New media, Political participation

Introduction

Democracy has evolved to become a system of governance that is central in world politics owing to its provision for people-participation. The ideology behind the system is that government performs better when people are involved in the processes of their leadership. Nigeria transited to democratic rule in 1999, after stints of military and civil rule after the attainment of independence in the year 1960. Suntai and Targena (2017) contend that

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democracy is not sustainable unless the media is involved. This implies that the Nigerian media, as the fourth estate of the realm, has been involved in the democracy of the nation through the provision of a voice to the people, surveillance of the society, agenda setting, and framing of national issues that are covered for the understanding of the audience. The participatory nature of democracy necessitates the role of mass media as there is a need for constant information and dialogue, this explains the role of the media in a democratic state like Nigeria with an estimated population of 213 million (Worldometer, 2021).

Print, radio, and television were the dominant media platforms in Nigeria at the start of the fourth republic and they played the roles of public enlightenment, election campaigning, projection of government achievement, and interpretation of policies, among other things. One of the drawbacks of these old media is the lack of opportunity for instant and live interactions. Also, to a large extent, ownership interests and rigorous editorial processes meant that some level of 'richness' were removed from news stories before such made published on the broadcast. The new media has taken the center stage and now plays a crucial role in politics and democratic advocacy across nations, including Nigeria. McNair (2009) and Shadrach (2017) believe that this role of the new media is facilitated by its capacity to provide viable and interactive platforms for political awareness, political mobilization, political debates, and political advertising. Popular political cum democratic events where the new media has played a prominent role across nations of the world are; The US Presidential Election in 2009, The 2010 Arab Spring, The September Occupy Wall Street Protests, and the Military Takeover of Power in Egypt in 2013.

Chiefly, social media platforms such as the recently banned Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and blogging are major channels through which the global public is made aware of happenings in Nigeria today. According to The National Communication Commission (2021), the number of internet users' statistics in Nigeria as of November was 122 million. Facebook takes the largest share of this internet penetration with 83.27% sign-ups and is followed by Instagram with 10.51% (Global Stats, 2021). Africa Check (2021) pegs the number of Twitter users in Nigeria at 3 million, as of June 2021. These numbers explain why information travels fast on social media platforms. Consequently, Nigerians are more aware and involved in issues of public interest than they used to be. The 2020 #Endsars Protest, #JusticeforSylvester, and the 2015 & 2019 elections are cogent examples in line with this discourse.

New media in Nigeria have attracted the attention of research owing to its obvious effects on the socio-political domain of the life of the Nigerian citizenry. Studies such as Nwoke, Oyiga and Ihuoma (2013), Bello, Inuwa-Dutse and Heckel (2019), Suntai and Dargena (2017), Knoll, Mattes and Heiss (2020) examined the involvement of new media in Nigeria's democracy and elections. In present-day Nigeria, dominant stories in the new media revolve around politics, civic demonstrations, social crusades, the conduct of public officeholders, elections, political corruption, police brutality, governance, and security. Consequently, there are noticeable improvements in Nigerians' involvement in political and civil demands. The study derives its

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justification from this premise and its thrust is to examine how the new media has helped to mediate democratic engagement among Nigerians.

The objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the role of social media in democratic engagement in Nigeria,
2. Assess the dominant aspects of the political and civic life of Nigerians that the new media has helped to improve,
3. Identify the Nigerian government's responses to the use of new media platforms for democratic engagement.

Methods

This study adopted the qualitative desk research approach and case referencing. It critically reviewed secondary data from academic papers and published materials that are peculiar to the discourse. Case reference analysis is simply a detailed examination of the elements or structure of reference variables in a research activity. The study referenced eight (8) landmark cases of social media-driven democratic engagement action of youths in Nigeria.

Theoretical framework

This study is hinged on the public sphere and social capital theories. The public sphere theory evolved from the works of Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1989) and the assumption is “public sphere is a domain of our social life where opinions are formed”. Habermas argued that the public sphere consists of fora such as coffee houses or joints where upper-class members of society meet to discuss issues that are important and formulate opinions. Habermas' public sphere idea informed studies on public participation in and around national issues in the 20th-century global village. Social media provides a common ground for political dialogue and exchanges among users, regardless of orientation and social stratification. This study adopts the Public Sphere theory by arguing that platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram provide a public sphere for Nigerians to debate political issues and form opinions, thereby making informed decisions about democratic engagement.

Robert Putnam propounded social capital theory, and the theory explains the connection that exists among people and social networks, and the standards of mutual exchanges and trust that arise from them (Putnam, 2000). The theory represents the involvement of individuals in community engagement with a view to building networks aimed at achieving collective endeavors (Mustapha, Gbonegun & Mustapha, 2016). The social capital theory sees human relationships as a resource with the capacity to facilitate voluntary cooperation in order to achieve an endeavor or solve problems. This theory is applicable to the study as new media platforms have provided an avenue for people to converge and form communities to address challenges, despite the vast and diverse nature of contemporary Nigerian society where physical and direct contact can be difficult, if not impossible. The uniqueness of the new media is enshrined in its minimal or no gatekeeping approach, as opposed to the traditional media where there is a considerable level of control. Nigerian youths have seized this opportunity to

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actively engage the political systems, promote public concerns, call out culprits, and place a demand on leaders.

Literature review

Governance and democracy in Nigeria since 1999

Democracy is a pattern of governance, and it is a household name among international states across the world today. It is a system that allows for sustainable development when compared to authoritarian or military administration. Democracy is akin to the interests and aspirations of people, and their collective desires for change (Erunke, 2012). Democracy as a culture is rooted in the need for participation in the administration of a given state. The concept of democracy has been defined by scholars from different fields. Perhaps the most popular definition of all definitions of democracy was that which was advanced by Abraham Lincoln (Former US, President), he defined democracy as “government of the people, by the people and for the people”. Akinsanya (2000) had a broader view of the concept, to Akinsanya, democracy is not only a form of government in which rulership differs from monarchies, aristocracies, and gerontocracies; it also entails a state in which there is some form of political equality among the people. Odofoin (2007), Bako (2007), and Akinsanya and Erunke (2010) contend that democracy going by its popular definition is debatable as power rests in the hand of few and there had been records of mismanagement by agents of the state through the instrumentality of force. This submission has obviously characterized the democratic governance in Nigeria since 1999.

Chisom (2021) opines that democracy defends fundamental national values such as equality, liberty, moral self-development, common and private interests, social utility, the satisfaction of wants and efficient decisions, an independent electoral umpire, a strong and vibrant judiciary, an enlightened populace, a robust and free press, democratic culture and atmosphere of peace, and security. The Nigerian Fourth Republic began on May 29th of 1999, after decades of switches between civil and military rule. Expectations were that the newborn ‘democracy’ will deliver Nigeria from the decades of oppression, and the stranglehold of greedy public officials (Erunke, 2012). Nigeria has had four administrations since the switch to democratic rule in 1999, but it is not clear if all administrations that have ruled have truly ensured transparency, accessibility, respect for the rule of law and human rights, and public accountability. After almost 23 years of democratic rule in Nigeria, the Nigerian state can be described as a disguised dictatorship manifesting in the form of disregard for the rights of the ordinary citizens of the country. The lubricator of the wheel of democracy, for example, the separation of power, can be described as a mirage in Nigeria. The “executive” crows both the “legislative” and the “judiciary” and the will of the people are manipulated in favor of a selected few. There are also documented cases of unilateralism in the affairs of governance, ‘godfatherism’, ‘god-sonism’ and/or ‘god-daughterism’, and election rigging in Nigeria (Erunke, 2012).

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Ideal democracy places a premium on people's participation, hence the prominence of the role of the media. Invariably, sustainable democracy cannot be achieved when a free press and freedom of information are not in place. This implies that a society that allows for mediated participation and unlimited access to information from the citizens is essentially a democratic society. Gambo (2013) stresses that liberal democracies rest on the capacity organs of mass media to gather and publish information that guides citizens in making rational choices.

New media in Nigeria

Peter Carl Goldmark - the then Director of Engineering and Research at The Columbia Broadcasting Service (CBS) Television Network proposed the “*New Media*” concept in 1967. In a business plan, Goldmark termed electronic video recording as “New Media” (Guo, 2021). At present, there is no unified conceptualization for the new media as scholars have attempted to capture it the best way it seems to them. Xiong Chengyu, a professor at Tsinghua University, regards new media as a dynamic concept that relies on computer information processing and internet technologies. Chengyu further notes that the new media is the summary of the communication function of the ICTs and the Internet (Mengmeng, 2019). Friedmann and Friedmann (2008) see new media as the different forms of e-communication that are made possible using computer technology. As a novel media of mass communication, new media has filled up the information gap that existed between disseminator and receiver as we have it in the traditional media. It makes for equality in information communication. Hui (2020) believes that new media is the medium that meets the information needs of the audience and provides an opportunity for user-generated content.

Technologies described as new media, according to Agboola (2014) are digital, with the characteristic of being manipulated and compressible. They are also networkable, dense, and impartial; allowing users to generate content and exchange same. This way, the content can be made available on-demand and can be viewed on any electronic device. People can interact and share the idea with friends in the virtual space; thus, opening new creative and communication horizons, with its useful inclusiveness. New media is relative, in that as a communication tool, it changes form constantly with the advancements in ICT. New media relies on digital media, the internet, mobile communication devices, and other emerging technologies to provide information services to the audience (Yang, 2019).

The foundation for new media platforms was laid in Nigeria when the country opened up its shores to ICT in the late 1990s and at the beginning of the new millennium (Wilson & Arinze, 2013). Precisely in 2001, mobile telecommunication was inaugurated in Nigeria, this laid the marker for mobile internet penetration. Web 2.0 which allowed for the assemblage and management of large crowds with common interests in social interaction was founded in 2004 (Heirmath & Kenchakkanavar, 2016). These developments allowed for the creation of new media platforms and Nigeria through these innovations began to birth novel ways of processing, disseminating, discussing, and reacting to information in the social space. The chief

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protagonists of new media, especially as a journalism channel; are blogs, social network sites, and e-news sites.

Social networks: Social networks are popular new media tools used to share content (texts, pictures, videos, and voice recordings) and experiences while facilitating electronic conversations between people or among a group of people. Besides from the primary utility of social media for social communications, Nigerians have used the medium to disseminate information on the go. People record videos and upload such for the view of people in the public space; this alongside opinions (in texts and/or pictures) can alter or consolidate perceptions of the public concerning issues. Additionally, full-fledged mass media organizations (for example, NigeriaInfo 99.3fm, Punch Newspapers, and Channels Television) also have social media platforms, especially Facebook, and Instagram, with which they complement their primary transmissions.

Blog: Blogs are websites on which personal opinions, activities, and experiences are written (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2021). Blogs contain personal experiences and commentaries that are in digital forms. Often, hyperlinks to other online articles are planted in blogs. Blogposts can be modified as events unfold. Blogs typically focus on unique themes, and they have comment sections where readers drop feedback. Many people use blogs as they would a personal journal or diary. When one writes on Facebook and receives comments, then the process of blogging has begun; tweeting a short sentence of 140 characters on Twitter also makes one a micro blogger. The same applies to a video blogger when one uploads a video on YouTube for subscribers to watch and send-in comments. Patel (2012) notes that the essence of blogging is that it gives greater room for self-expression and allows one to treat issues in greater depth. A blog can have a custom domain to distinguish the owner from the crowd on social media. Popular bloggers in Nigeria are Japhet J. Omojuwa, Bella Naija, and Linda Ikeji.

E-news sites: Otherwise called online newspapers are websites that are dedicated to the consistent publication of news stories that otherwise would have been fitted into pages of hardcopy newspapers. In Nigeria, the pioneers of online news sites are Omoyele Sowore and Dolapo Olorunyomi, the founders of Sahara Reporters and Premium Times (Igyuve & Agbele, 2017). Both platforms were launched in 2006 and 2011 respectively. Following up on the success of online newspapers, most traditional newspapers in Nigeria, if not all, now have online versions and this avails the citizenry an opportunity to access their news stories anytime and anywhere (Igyuve & Agbele, 2016). Internet penetration in the country has provided Nigerians the opportunity to run numerous weblogs; many of which provided the masses the opportunity to air their views and make a meaningful contribution to topical issue discussions. Legit.com, Nairaland, Naijapost, Naija.com, and Pulse Nigeria are among the popular news sites in Nigeria (Suntai & Targema, 2017).

The idea behind citizen journalism is enabled by new media platforms, according to Glaser (Glaser, 2006). It is a form of journalism where people without professional training in

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journalism use most tools of modern technology and the global distribution of the internet to create, augment or fact-check news content on their own or in collaboration with others. Radsch (2013) views citizen journalism as an alternative form of newsgathering and reporting that functions outside mainstream media institutions. Citizen journalism embraces new media platforms to achieve its aims, especially social media platforms such as Facebook (Individual Facebook Accounts, Pages and Groups), Instagram Handles, YouTube, and Twitter. It is also driven through the News sites like Sahara Reporters, Cable News and CNNireport; and blogs like Linda Ikeji Blog, and naij.com. Mainstream media such as Channels TV has also incorporated citizen journalism into its operation. Channels TV has the 'iWitness' reporter platform through which its audience submits on-the-go news content, especially videos, and photos. Submissions turned in are reviewed and when confirmed, are used to embellish their primary contents. This approach was useful during the 2015 general elections and the #EndSars protests.

New media and Nigerians' involvement in democratic and political engagement

At the heart of democracy is the participation of citizens. In societies that have come to be idolized for participatory politics, information has played a critical role. In developing nations like Nigeria, the new media offers spaces for the expression and mobilization of groups that have hitherto been marginalized. Hyun and Kim (2015) suggest that citizens need to be motivated to become politically active; this makes the communication of essential political information paramount. Journalism driven by social media platforms has helped improve the participation of Nigerians in politics and democratic engagement. Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube are social media platforms widely used for political participation by youths in academic environments, religious societies, and the general society. This stems from how well youths use these applications for social interaction. Dzandu, Gyamfi-Agyemang and Quansah (2016) confirm that the likelihood for youths to use social media platforms for political participation is high as they use the same social media for communication and socialization purposes. Some of these activities are political advocacy, blogging campaigning, discussions, monitoring, and reportage of electoral malpractices. Also, we have public consultations and writing to public officials (Omotayo & Folorunsho, 2020). As a space where citizens share information and discuss public affairs, social media serve as a viable platform for enhancing participatory democracy (Gil de Zúñiga, Jung & Valenzuela 2012; Kim, Shin & Kim, 2011).

Through new media technologies such as smartphones and social media platforms, individuals and groups across geographical locations receive news, share political information/news, communicate, form networks, collaborate on ideas, and make collective decisions on issues relating to their communities, towns, or cities. Mustapha and Omar (2020) add that through political discussions on social media platforms, citizens acquire political knowledge. Today, Nigerian citizens now have access to knowledge about issues that pertain to their constituencies, states, the nation, and happenings outside this shore. Events such as #OccupyNigeria, the 2015 and 2019 general elections in Nigeria, and #EndSARS movements

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are events that became successful owing to the involvement of social media. Nigerians participated in these events because they received information from online platforms. Using the #EndSars protest as a case, protesters were updated about events across the country, especially gathering points on online media (especially Twitter). This helped mobilization in different geographies. Also, during civic protests, social media provides information that helps to identify ways through which volunteering can be provided, this is called civic volunteering.

An election is a fundamental element of representative democracy. Through the election process, aspirants access public offices to represent those who invested their votes. New media technology helped to promote massive citizen participation in elections in the years 2015 and 2019 in Nigeria. Social media was used to promote candidates and manifestoes during the two elections. Personalized SMS and social media messages encouraged voting, this helped to increase individual political expression and voter-turnout on Election Day. In 2015, voters were electronically accredited on Election Day in major cities in the country. Also, social media platforms were heavily engaged by witnesses at polling booths to publish election results as votes were concluded and counted at polling units in different locations. People were calculating on their sheets, and at the end of the day when results were announced officially, the results tallied.

New media platforms have also provided the opportunity to engage political leaders. The traditional media offered a one-way communication route; this is not the case in the new media era where two-way communication is available. Public office holders and political aspirants now maintain profiles on social network applications which include Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Nigerians leverage these platforms to reach out to them. They can be sent directly or tagged on posts to call their attention. Direct e-mails can also be written to politicians. Political parties and aspirants in Nigeria, now run social media accounts to connect with the electorates and the constituents while taking feedback instantaneously. Xenos, Vromen and Loader (2014) conclude that people are shifting from a citizenship characterized by voting and writing to legislators to “a more personalized politics of self-actualization and expressive engagement”.

Social media and democratic engagement by youths in Nigeria - Landmark cases

Social media has grown into a formidable force and has undeniably influenced an appreciable number of civic & democratic engagement actions. It has formed the foundation and driven political events, civic concerns, social activism, and humanitarian movements which translated from the virtual to the reality and resulted in physical actions by concerned parties. Some landmark cases which explain the impact of social media in democratic and civic engagement by Nigerians are discussed below.

- **The #ENDSARS**

The #EndSars protest revolved around the popular Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS) of the Nigerian Police - a unit created in 1992. Unlike other police units, SARS operatives worked in

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unorthodox ways and were allowed to go hard in their combat against organized crimes. Since 2016, there were registered cases of extortion, gross disregard for people's right, and unlawful arrests of innocent citizens by the SARS. Other allegations ranging from kidnappings, rapes, and extra-judicial killings were also documented against the unit. The #EndSARS hashtag was started in mid-2017 by Segun Awosanya @segalink (Techpoint, 2019). The movement gained momentum on October 3rd, 2020, when a video went viral. In the video, SARs officials were filmed shooting a young man and stealing his car (a white SUV) and leaving him for dead (abandoned him) on a road in Delta State (Abbo, Njidda & Baba, 2020). Shortly afterwards, youth-led protests scattered across different cities against police brutality spread within and outside Nigeria (Kazeem, 2020).

Shayera Dark in an Aljazeera report in October 2020 documents that for two weeks, thousands of young Nigerians, home and abroad took to the streets in their respective locations to call for the dissolution of the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), owing to atrocities that officers of the unit had committed. It was the first time that these calls garnered such widespread support and international media coverage. Social media platforms played a prominent role in spreading this gospel as the EndSARS hashtag was the top trending hashtag in the world with over 2 million tweets on the 9th of October 2020 (Obia, 2020). The hashtag trended in a lot of countries including the US and the UK. Nigerian/International celebrities and high-profile personalities with large followings who jumped on the hashtag wagon, this boosted the hashtag trending.

This movement transcended the Nigerian borders and in a short time, Nigerians in the diaspora and those well-to-do within announced support to help cover the phone and data bills of demonstrators so they could afford to keep tweeting and sustaining the momentum. In South Africa, a Nigerian human rights lawyer, Omolara Oriye also orchestrated the protest via WhatsApp in Pretoria. She shared the video wherein Nigerian police officers manhandled demonstrators, as posted on Twitter. The information gap that existed as result of the weakness of local media channels were closed by social media influencers and celebrities who also participated and posted about the protest on their social media timelines.

The core of the protests included a call for the Nigerian government of to scrap SARS. Five demands were officially made on the 11th of October 2020 and published on different social media platforms by the protesters. These demands were for the release of all arrested protesters; justice for all deceased victims of police brutality and appropriate compensation for their families; setting up an independent body to oversee the investigation and prosecution of all reports of Police misconduct; psychological evaluation of disbanded SARS officers in line with Police Act before they can be redeployed; increase in police officers' salary. Lagos State felt the most impact of the demonstrations by thousands of youths at the Lekki Toll Plaza and the state secretariat for days. Other cities such as Port Harcourt, Ibadan, Kano, Cross Rivers, and the Federal Capital Territory experienced these demonstrations. The federal government responded to this movement by disbanding the unit. The IG of the Nigerian Police Force

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announced the disbandment of SARS and the commitment to advancing police reforms. A new security outfit – the Special Weapons and Tactics Team (SWAT) was then set up (Adeleye, 2020).

▪ #JusticeForSylvester

In November 2021, a sad story about the death of a 12-year-old junior high school student in Lagos State headlined on new media platforms. The student, identified as Sylvester of Downen College, Lagos, died under controversial circumstances on November 30: it was alleged that he was bullied by senior students at the same school. According to the International Centre for Investigative Journalism (2021), the late Sylvester was rumored to have been attacked by some of his senior colleagues for refusing to join a cult group. He was reported to have been attacked and fed with chemical, this led him to sustaining internal injuries which resulted in his untimely death on November 30, 2021.

Using the hashtag #JusticeForSylvester, the story was the most profiled on social media in the last weeks of November in Nigeria, especially in Lagos. The traffic garnered on the online media helped to get the attention of the ministry of education, state government (Lagos and Delta states, Delta being the state of origin of the deceased student), federal legislators and the federal government. Downen College has since been shut down by the Lagos State Government (Africa News, 2021) while the police investigate the matter. Some concerned women also held a protest and candle light procession to express their grief over the death of the promising child. Primarily women, the protesters gathered in front of Downen College, Lekki, Lagos, on Wednesday morning (8th December 2021) in protest against the death of the 12-year-old. This protest was streamed live on the social media handles of on-ground protesters and even made it to BBC News Pidgin.

Before Sylvester's death, he was reported to have named five students who inflicted multiple internal injuries on him. The Lagos State police commissioner on Tuesday, 7th December disclosed that key suspects in the case have been arrested. The school has equally been heavily criticized for downplaying the severity of the issue, having denied that the injury that led to Sylvester's death was sustained in a football match. Students at the school have come out on social media platforms to deny this (PM News Nigeria, 2021). There are now petitions for the school to be investigated for acts of commission and omission, and if found culpable, be made to pay the price (Vanguard Newspaper, 2021). Through new media platforms, this event also provided an opportunity to create awareness about issues in the educational system in Nigeria, issues such as: The public-school problems of poor infrastructure, poorly paid teachers, poor learning environment and demoralized teachers. These problems have resulted in many families opting to send their children to private schools.

▪ #BringBackOurGirls

Bring back our girls is arguably, the most popular and biggest Twitter trend in Nigeria. It came about after the abduction of 276 female students from Government Girls Secondary School,

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Chibok, Borno State on April 14th, 2014. The popular terrorist group, Boko Haram claimed responsibility for this act. It was reported that 57 of them escaped from the trucks used to convey the students, hence, the terrorist group successfully escaped with 219 students. The issue was of national concern but the movement for bring back our girls started gaining momentum when it appeared that the sitting president appeared less concerned about the matter, having appeared at a campaign rally in Kano a day after the kidnap. His photos at the birthday party of a popular monarch were also posted on Twitter later that day. Techpoint (2019) records that the #Bringbackourgirls hashtag came about after a tweet by Oby Ezekwesili, former minister of education. The tweet reads

*‘Lend your Voice to the Cause of our Girls.
Please All, use the hashtag #BringBackOurGirls to
keep the momentum UNTIL they are RESCUED’*
— Oby Ezekwesili (@obyzeeks) April 23, 2014

Leaders across the world, international organisations, Nigerian music and movie stars, afterwards joined the campaign in solidarity. Aljazeera in 2019 reported that 107 girls, out of the 219 had been found or released after negotiations between the Nigerian government and the terrorist group. Voice of America on the 15th of April 2021 echoed the status of the hunt for the rescue of the remaining girls in its leading online article, titled: “More Than 100 Chibok Girls Still Missing Seven Years Later.” The search for the lost girls continues, with many questions still left unanswered.

▪ #RevolutionNow Movement

Monday 8th August 2019, Nigerian activist, Omoyele Sowore, started the “RevolutionNow” movement (Roape, 2019). Organizers of the movement said the protest was intended to make the government improve the lives of Nigerians. The protest was tagged #RevolutionNow and its 5-key demands were: An economy that works for the masses; an effective and democratic end to insecurity; an end to systemic corruption and for total system change; The immediate implementation of the N30,000 minimum wage; Free and quality education for all. After mobilization on social media, hundreds of protesters in Lagos kick started the "RevolutionNow" movement which took the form of a march. Other states such as Ondo, Osun, Ogun, Cross Rivers and Abuja also experienced demonstrations by youths to the effect.

The Nigerian government condemned the protest, calling it a concealed attempt by those who lost elections to the ruling administration to destabilize the country (Adnan, 2019). In response to the protest, the federal government deployed security forces at strategic locations to douse demonstrations. The protest almost went south at some point when protesters charged security agents who responded with teargas. Two days before the start of the protest, Omoyele Sowore - convener of the protest was arrested two days by security forces, on the grounds that the protest was harmful to public peace. Sowore’s detention did not in any way halt the protest as members of the group to which the convener belonged, CORE (Coalition for Revolution) and Nigerians who bought into the movement insisted it was targeted at achieving system change

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and an end to oppression of the citizens by the ruling government. The #RevolutionNow campaign registered demonstrations in 14 cities across Nigeria. Channels TV reported that five people were arrested in Abeokuta by security forces while seven people were arrested in Ondo State. In Lagos, a Revolution Now protester was shot by the police, while nine others, including some journalists, were arrested. Pro-govt protesters and groups were equally mobilized online and offline to disrupt #RevolutionNow protest. The hashtag #RevolutionNow trended on twitter around that period and was greatly covered by news sites. The protest did not totally achieve its purpose, but it served as a forerunner to the #EndSARS protest in 2021.

▪ #OccupyNigeria protests

The occupy Nigeria protest was birthed because of the removal of fuel subsidy by the Nigerian federal government on January 2nd, 2012. The presidency on Jan. 1st, 2012, announced an increase in petrol pump price of petrol from 65 Naira to 141 Naira following the removal of oil subsidy. Subsidy is explained as the difference between the cost of importation and the locally regulated prices (Social Action, 2012) and the Nigerian Federal Government says it covers that payment on behalf of Nigerians. According to Hari (2014), Nigerians perceive the said subsidy as the only tangible benefit enjoyed from the state, hence, the gross disapproval towards its removal. Also, the hike in price of petroleum products also had negative effect on the cost of livelihood. Social media platforms which include Twitter and Facebook (Egbunike, 2015) were used to mobilize Nigerians, especially youths across major cities for demonstrations to express outrage on the increment of prices of petroleum products. Twitter's #OccupyNigeria trended massively and a hub where the torches of grievances were lit. Aborisade (2012) summed up the period as one when the country was soaked in a protest mood.

The protests left the safety of individual virtual platforms and became physical protests around popular cities in the country such as Lagos, Minna, and Abuja. Nigerians in diaspora also joined in the protests. The #OccupyNigeria drew from the Occupy Wall Street protest of New York in November 2011. It tapped the widespread sense that the people who form the basis of the society (equaling about 99%) are downtrodden. The #OccupyNigeria social movement stood against the exploitative and anti-masses policies of the Nigeria government. The government response was a reduction of the new petrol pump price by 30%, bringing it to ₦97 after days of protests.

▪ 2015 & 2019 Elections

The 2015 presidential election is perhaps one of the most keenly contested elections in Nigeria. One of the qualities that stood out the 2015 election is that it saw a large participation of users on Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and online news platforms. One of the platforms heavily engaged was Twitter. A few of the pro-Jonathan and pro- Buhari twitter handles and hashtags are outlined below:

Jonathan - @GEJ_Nigeria @presidentGEJ #forwardnigeria #gejvictory2015 #goodlucknigeria

Buhari - @buhariosibanjo @profosibanjo #ichoosGMB #GMB15 #febuhari #thisisbuhari

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Asides from Twitter, election candidates also relied on Facebook, SMS and WhatsApp to promote their campaigns. There was also the use of new media devices for the accreditation process by the Independent National Electoral Commission. This form of accreditation increased the credibility of Nigeria electoral process. Assibong and Oshanisi (2018) concluded that the use of ICTs such as card reader resulted in some debates before, during and after the 2015 Nigerian general elections. The impact of the reader device, regardless of its various challenges during the election cannot be quantified (Alhassan, 2018). The card reader for one thing made accreditation of voters faster in centers where it worked. Dare, in Eddings (2015) also submitted that the 2015 election was dominated and decided by social media. He advanced that social media played the watchdog role in maintaining the integrity of the election process. As voting were concluded at polling units and counted, the results were all over social media. Ordinary people, using excel sheets on their computer devices were tallying the counts, and when results were announced officially, the results were a match. Social media came alive for Nigerians as it was depended upon for the breaking news regarding the election.

For the 2019 elections, the Independent National Electoral Commission actively engaged social media for voters' education. Nwoke et al. (2019) notes that in the months leading to the election, INEC published professional messages on their websites and advised everyone, including people with disabilities and non-English speakers to go out and exercise their civic right. On election days, celebrities and politicians posted videos and images of themselves going to polling units to cast their votes, this in some ways encouraged people to turn-out for voting. The election trended on Twitter with the hashtag #NigeriaDecides and #NigeriaDecides2019. In some cases, anomalies such as underage voting, no and/or insufficient voting materials for certain offices and violence in some centers were also published online by witnesses. A big issue during this election was that there was unfortunate drop of 43.6% voter turnout compared to 2015. Also, Nigerians of Northern orientation, who were less dominant on social media voted massively as opposed to the elite southern Nigerian. This brought about the catchphrase 'Elections are not won on Twitter'.

▪ The UNIZIK School Fee hike protest

On July 12th, 2021, students of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University (also known as UNIZIK), Awka, Anambra State kicked against the hike in their school fees through public demonstrations. The students displayed different kinds of placards with inscriptions which had messages such as: 'Say no to school fees hike', and 'Reduce Unizik School Fees'. This protest was equally widely published and gained traction on Instagram platforms and the Twittersphere. Students barricaded a portion of the Enugu-Onitsha highway over the hike in school fees by the university authority. Some of the students who spoke to Sahara Reporters mentioned that school fee was increased from N20,100 to 56,700 for regular students while Year 1 students school fee ranged from N97,000 to N105,000, minus acceptance fee of N48,000. They bemoaned the hike in school fee and how some students were on the verge of dropping out. After 5 days of the protest online and offline, the school management had a meeting with the student union and reverted the school fees to the old rate. Tribune Newspapers

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(2021) reported that Vice-Chancellor of the University, represented by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Admin), Prof. Joseph Ikechukwu, in his address to journalist said 'for the sake of already existing peace between the school management and the students, the university under his leadership, had agreed to reduce the school fees, as demanded by the students.

▪ #FixOkunRoads

In October 2021, attention of Nigerians and the world was drawn to the state of the Kabba-Egbe-Ilorin road in Kogi State through the #FixOkunRoads that trended on the social media platform 'twitter'. According to Vanguard Newspaper (2021), N621.2bn was approved by the Nigerian Federal Executive Council for the reconstruction of 21 federal roads in the country. This allocation only covered some parts of the country without recourse to dilapidated roads such as Kabba-Egbe-Ilorin Road in Kogi State. The awareness campaign was an initiative set up by a concerned social cultural group called the Apapo Omo Yagba Peace Association. Through the hashtag, the group and youths from the Kogi West senatorial district called the attention of the Federal Government to fix abandoned roads in Okunland. They also appealed to Smart Adeyemi, the lawmaker, representing the same federal constituency, Kogi West senatorial district, and other distinguished individuals in the country to come to their aid. The said road is a major highway in Nigeria and is very crucial to the revitalization project ongoing at the Egbe Hospital. Kogi Reports (2021) noted that the said road was virtually closed to traffic because of complete dilapidation and wreckage which had left road users with no other option but to abandon vehicles that were stuck in the mud. Travelers coming through Lagos or Abuja to Egbe were advised against using the road. People were warned against using the road because of its bad condition as it was fast turning the area into a Kidnappers' den.

Social media platforms played a key role in all the events examined under this section. Obia (2020) submits that Twitter was engaged for information sharing with respect to the #EndSars protest venues across the country and keep protesters abreast on news events, which greatly helped coordination and mobilization in different geographies. Also, with hashtags like #EndSARS, #SARSMustEnd, #EndPoliceBrutality, #BringBackOurGirls, #OccupyNigeria, #RevolutionNow and #EndSARSNOW, there was an amplification of these movements through successive retweets and shares on platforms which include Instagram, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter. This made it easy for international new outlets to monitor the situation, as well as anyone who desired to know the present status of these events. Through these social media, protesters were also able to call-out brands and celebrities that went numb on the issues protested. During the #EndSars protests, some banks were called-out on Twitter for not tweeting about #EndSARS and not funding the campaigns in any way, as done by even start-up brands. There were also calls to unfollow the Nigerian President on Twitter due to his perceived laxity on the matter, this led to him losing 100,000 followers (Obia, 2020).

Government's response to utilization of new media for political and civil engagement

There have been several criticisms from the government with regards to how the new media has been engaged for political and civic engagement by Nigerians. The major response is the

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advocation that the social media be regulated. Lai Mohammed (Minister for Information and Culture) contends that social media in Nigeria must be regulated. The minister's argument tends towards fake news being one of its fallouts and "the biggest challenge facing Nigeria today". Using the #EndSARS protest as an example, the minister described the #EndSARS protest as a social media "war" and that a social media policy was required so that social media can be shut down the moment it becomes a menace" (Obia, 2020).

The 1999 constitution of Nigeria recognizes the 'Freedom of expression' of the Nigerian citizen, in Section 39 (1). The Federal government of Nigeria has maintained that it respects the rights of individuals, however it has also advanced the idea that technology abuse which disturbs national security will not be allowed to fester (Tonye, 2019). Some of the measures taken by the government to control the use of new media platforms, especially the social media are Twitter Ban (June 2021), Social Media Tax, Hate Speech Bill, The Internet Falsehood and Manipulation Bill, and Harassment and Arrest of Key Players during social media driven protest/demonstrations.

The Nigerian President, Mohammadu Buhari on the 5th of June 2021 announced the indefinite suspension of Twitter after his verified account was suspended and one of his tweets was deleted. The said tweet referred to Nigerian secessionists group, the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) during their agitations. The tweet affirmed the presidency's intention to treat "those who misbehave today" in "the language they will understand." (Blakenship & Golubski, 2021). This announcement resulted in the removal of twitter from among the list of applications that could be accessed in Nigeria. Twitter played key role during recent demonstrations in the country, especially the #EndSARS. In appraising the influence of Twitter in Nigeria, Odia (2020) notes, "there has been barely any social media platform contesting with Twitter in hosting Nigerian conversations — whether protests, rants or energizing social movements". This implies that the ban, to some extent grounded the efficiency of mobilization for social crusades.

Another attempt to regulate the information space came to light in 2019 with the introduction of the Internet Falsehood and Manipulations Bill - a bill targeted at social media users, internet intermediaries and online media outlets. The bill, according to Nzewi (2021) seeks to curtail the spread of false information. The penalty of three-year jail term was spelt out for anyone involved in the abuse of social media or an option of fine of N150, 000 or both. It also proposes a fine of N10 million for media houses involved in peddling falsehood or misleading the public. The bill finally advised a fine of ₦300,000 or three-year jail term, or both for anyone found guilty of making statements that diminish public confidence in the Nigerian Government. This bill has not been passed into law. Like the social media bill, there exists the 'Hate Speech Bill' of 2018. The Bill prohibits the use, production, publishing, distribution, presentation, or direction of the performance of any visual or written material which is threatening, abusive or insulting or involves the use of such words in order to stir up ethnic hatred or from which ethnic hatred is likely to be stirred up against such person from an ethnic group in Nigeria (Eke, 2020).

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The hate speech bill proposes that persons pronounced guilty (by law) of any form of hate speech that leads to the death of another person shall die by hanging (Utomi, 2020). The penalty for hate speech was raised from N500,000 to N5 million in August 2020.

The Nigerian Federal Inland Revenue Service is also currently seeking to get online businesses on the social media to pay income tax net, through an amendment of the Finance Act and approval by the National Assembly (Adeyemi & Adedokun, 2021). The expectation is that social media platforms in registration in Nigeria register with the Nigerian government and remit tax. Another response of the government to the use of social media for mass mobilization and civil demonstrations is the harassment and arrest of influencers, activists, financiers, convener(s), and promoters of civil demonstrations. After the #EndSARS protests, the media reported the arrest of Peter Eromosele by the Nigeria Police Force operatives on Saturday November 7th, 2020. Sahara Reporters gathered that the Edo State-born graduate of Computer Engineering was arrested at his residence in Lagos. Additionally, Omoyele Sowore, who doubles as a journalist and activist was arrested for orchestrating demonstrations against the government using the social media. In the aftermath of the #EndSARS protest, some of the protesters had their accounts flagged by the Nigerian apex bank - the Central Bank, while some had their International Passports flagged.

Conclusion and Recommendations

New media is fundamental in the strengthening of democracy in Nigeria. The continued penetration of these platforms into the Nigerian society makes them important tools for communication and today, there are almost no communication gaps between people or social groups anymore. Through online platforms such as e-news sites, social media and blogs, instant and two-way communication is now possible. Social media have also given Nigerian citizens unique opportunities to obtain information directly rather than relying on traditional media channels. This possibility has helped to improve the democratic and civic engagement of the Nigerians, especially in the last 7 years.

This study documents evidence that there is an improvement in political participation and civic awareness among Nigerians. Some of the areas of political participation includes activities as political discussions in the online space, promotion of deeper political campaigns, observing turnout for elections, monitoring of elections and reportage of violation of the electoral process such as underage voting, rigging, thuggery, and monetary inducements. The new media has a played key role in the mobilization of civic campaigns which have caught the attention of government and the international media, examples being the #EndSARS, #OccupyNigeria and #BringBackOurGirls. Nigerian youths are not as marginalized as they used to be, they now use the highly democratized social media to have two-way communication, mobilize and coordinate social action aimed at holding leaders accountable.

Despite the positives that can be drawn from the penetration of the new media into Nigeria, regarding democratic and civic engagement, new media platforms have been abused in some

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ways such as dissemination of outright disinformation, fake news and hate speech capable of brewing hatred among Nigerians, thus overheating the polity. This corroborates the position of Emetumah (2016) who notes that though social media facilitates political awareness among Nigeria's electorates; they also serve the purpose of propaganda and hate speech dissemination. This is not encouraging for the democratic and peaceful society that Nigerians dream and strive to achieve. Some of the protests witnessed in Nigeria have also turned-out sour owing to the damage of private and public properties, as well as the loss of lives recorded.

In some ways, most of the action experienced in the Nigerian society are usually online. The contribution on social media does not match the offline political participation: the place where the deal is sealed. There is less participation at the polling centers despite the noise in the online media. Youths are more active in online political participation and social media activism than they do offline politics. The study also discovered that government's response to the use of new media platforms for democratic engagement in Nigeria is not encouraging; with reactions coming in the form of ban on a social media platform (i.e., Twitter in June 2021), social media tax, hate speech bill and the internet falsehood and manipulation bill.

Consequent to findings of this study, this study makes the following recommendations.

1. Nigerians should be more engaged in offline politics.
2. Political stakeholders in Nigeria should renegotiate their engagement with the youths through online platforms.
3. The government should engage Nigerians more with a view to appreciating their concerns, harnessing their creativity and incorporating such into social reforms and policies to help create a better Nigeria.
4. Social media organizations should set mechanisms in place so that fake news and hate speeches can be blocked out from content published on their platforms.
5. The government and mainstream media stakeholders should embark on national orientation on the implications of promoting fake news, disinformation and hate speech in the online media space.

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